

Ranch Movie Complicated When Wife Claims Royalties For Idea

By Monte Noelke

9-16-65

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MERTZON — Instead of continuing to make written reports and surveys of the ranch scene, I have laid plans to adopt an idea of my wife's and start a movie based on the way life is lived out here on the prairie.

I hate to admit this. But the decision to try films and abandon graphs, charts and polls is necessary because the Department of Agriculture hasn't shown one speck of interest in purchasing the results of my findings. And to keep hammering out all kinds of information without getting so much as a bid out of this vast agency is foolish.

Considering that they obviously don't care for my written suggestions on how to relieve some of the suffering out in the shortgrass country, I have hopes that a film briefing them on what life is like in this land of flourishing mesquite and not-too-flourishing income will get their attention and one of their checks.

To launch a moving picture isn't nearly as easy as turning out a report. This is especially true in my case because the originator of the plan (my mate) is extremely sensitive to any sort of editing when applied to her projects. Furthermore, she belongs to the school of inventors and creators who strongly adhere to the rule that regardless of where or how their material is used, the first step is to make a contract specifying the royalties to be paid.

In order to smooth this out, we sat down to a businesslike conference. As in 99 cases out of 100 where husband and wife talk business, we were soon locked in a conflict which would have startled a retired marriage counselor just back from 20 years' service in a country where polygamy is practiced.

The basis of our argument revolved around whether to cut a scene 12 hours long showing frijole beans soaking on the kitchen cabinet — and whether we should shoot hundreds of feet of film depicting the sad condition of the clothes hanging in the closet of the rancher's wife.

My wife contended that if Secretary Freeman could only see the beans as a symbol of how poor we were eating, and the sparsely stocked clothes closets on which ranch females depend for protection against cold winters and hot summers, he would be moved to the point of doubling the tariff on agricultural imports and might also charter a plane to bring us immediate financial aid.

I tried to reason with her, pointing out that the Secretary knows we were eating beans back when calves brought 40 cents a pound and lambs were priceless as rubies. I advised her further that if wives of all my compadres were as lucky as she and still had all their college clothes (which her parents had bought in the late 1940s) as well as enough shoes to outfit four lines of chorus girls, then we'd better pray that the government didn't get wind of all these silks and satins lest we be cut off without one nickel of wool and lamb incentive pay.

It's a blessing that no one heard the rest of our disagreement. I'm particularly thankful that one of those gals who are up in the air from morn till night over women's rights didn't drop in about midpoint; that was when I took command of the situation and let her know that I was head of the household and would make the movie any way I wanted to.

Of course I did compromise on a point or two by deciding: (a) the 12-hour scene of the beans soaking wasn't such a bad idea after all; (b) the shots of the ranch wives' closets were just the thing to tug Orville's heart; and (c) since it was her idea, I would make financial arrangements to empty the lay-away bins of all the department stores on Main Street of the clothes she had ordered before this movie scheme was ever heard of. The latter was conceded as payment for royalties on the movie rights.

After completing these preliminary arrangements I was too exhausted for much further work. I did sketch out a few notes on a sequence showing a rancher pacing around and around a bank on his note renewal day. I drew up a rough draft of a bunch of hombres standing in line at a free barbecue — but I planned to have the film narrator say this was a column of stockmen clamoring to receive the latest data from the USDA on how to run a modern ranch.

Finally I paused and recalled my past failure to reach the huge agency and concluded that before spending much time on this movie I'd better dash off a note asking if they had a projection room and other paraphernalia necessary for cinema viewing. As soon as I get the go-ahead from the USDA to start shooting, I'll get the show underway. Meanwhile I imagine it will take all my leisure time to pick up enough dead wool to pay off what the royalties have already cost me.